

Bachelor of Early Childhood Education Programme - Open University Malaysia Framework

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of the design and development of Bachelor of Early Childhood Education with Honours programme for delivery through open and distance learning methodology at the Open University Malaysia. This programme is designed to meet the needs of persons interested in pursuing careers in early childhood education who are currently employed in preschools, public schools, child care centers or other childhood care facilities. It also aims to develop the specialist skills and knowledge gained through the completion of Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE). This is in line with the organization's mission to widen access to quality education as well as to provide lifelong learning opportunities by adopting and engaging learning environment at competitive and affordable cost. This paper focuses on the curriculum development, the learning methodology, the practicum requirements and planning, the courseware development, the e-learning delivery platform and on the programme quality assurance.

1. Introduction

Most developers of Open Distance Learning (ODL) are concerned with opening up education to a wider range of learners as learners entering a distance education course for the first time face a transition to a mode of education which can be quite different to what they have experienced before. Nearly all education in schools takes place in classes taught by teachers. The same goes to conventional educational institutions. According to Kember (2007), distance education is the contrast, characterised by the absence of a teacher at all time or mostly all of the time. Therefore, it is vital to build a comprehensive and flexible approach in handling open learning environment to maintain the learners' interest at all times.

This paper gives a overview of the design and development of Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECHE) with Honours degree programme at the Open University Malaysia and is organised into several sections. Section 2 focuses on the aim and purpose of the programme. Section 3 will discuss on the aspects of curriculum development. Section 4 emphasizes the learning and delivery methodology and followed by the courseware development in Section 5 and Assessment in Section 6.

2. Aims and Purpose

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is the seventh private university in Malaysia established in 2000 It began with 753 learners and 4 programmes. After 10 years in operations, OUM currently has over 79,000 learners in 70 academic programmes and 48 Learning Centres nationwide.

The Faculty of Education and Languages (FEL) was established with the objective of providing tertiary education in the areas of education, languages and social sciences. The faculty currently offers ten programmes including Bachelor of Early Childhood Education with Honours.

In this paper, we will discuss how the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECHE) programme is delivered through ODL.

The Bachelor of Early Childhood Education with Honours degree is designed to meet the needs of persons interested in pursuing careers in early childhood education who are currently employed in preschools, public schools, child care centres or other childhood care facilities. It is also aim to develop the specialist skills and knowledge gained through the completion of Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE). This is in line with the organization's mission to widen access to quality education as well as to provide lifelong learning opportunities by adopting and engaging learning environment at competitive and affordable cost.

Students specializing in this programme will be able to develop the abilities to teach and administer all facets of an early childhood programme along with the knowledge of childhood development and early childhood education. Personal characteristics for this field are defined through a passion for working with young children, patience, creativity, and interest in techniques for enhancing interpersonal relationships with children and adults.

The programme draws upon theoretical and practical perspectives to illuminate understanding of education and the context in which it takes place. The programme provides students with a broad and balanced knowledge of some of the principal concerns of early childhood education. It encourages the systematic analysis of the aims and purposes of early childhood education through critical reflection and collaborative enquiry and supports the development of key skills and provides a supportive environment for students in order to enable them to achieve their learning goals, monitoring their progression and achievement.

It will support and guide students in planning, undertaking and evaluating research in early childhood education and raises awareness of local, national and international issues in the domain. It also provides opportunities for students to appraise a variety of approaches to teaching and learning.

3. Curriculum Development

Curriculum design and development plays an important role in determining the success of any programme delivered via ODL. In the process of developing the curriculum for this programme, OUM ensures that the learning outcomes such as knowledge, skills and attitudes will reflect the OUM graduates.

The curriculum for this programme is of the same standards by other universities locally and abroad. It has also been formulated to facilitate in an ODL system. The syllabi that were suggested by the SME are also taken into consideration. The faculty appointed various subjects experts to view the content for each subject in order to meet the current knowledge of the discipline. The programme is also reviewed by the panel reviewer to check on its currency and relevancy. This is to ensure that learners graduating from this programme will be able to demonstrate extended knowledge and understanding of human development as well as to have competence in the management and coordination of children's services. Learners will also be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of factors that affect decision making for children's services and able to demonstrate knowledge of professional roles of early childhood educators.

Fadzil (2002) has quoted that there are three main factors that influences the design of curriculum in an ODL environment, to be precise, the target group of learners, expectation on its learners upon graduation and the pre-defined structure of the programme's academic calendar. Melton (2002) also related three tasks that can do a great deal to help with the development of a framework for a programme. The tasks involved identifying that target group, clarifying the aims and objectives of the proposed programme and deciding the structure. Figure 1 shows the general approach that OUM followed in developing a curriculum.

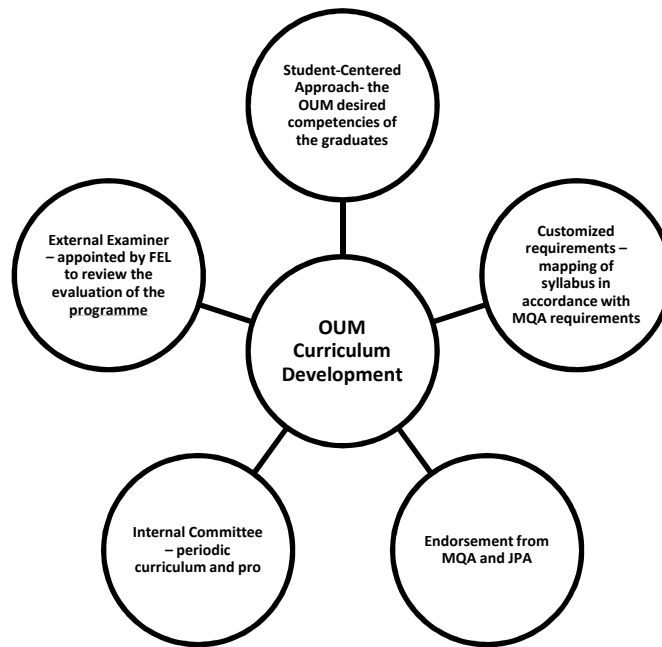


Figure 1 The OU Malaysia Curriculum Development Framework

The student-centered approach is an important factor in ODL. According to Moran and Myringer (1999) in Kember (2007), defined flexible learning as “approaches to teaching and learning which are learner-centered, free of time, place and methods of learning and teaching, and use appropriate technologies in a networked environment”. Taking this into consideration, OUM has outlined a guided schedule for learners to follow such as reading the modules and completing assignments, attending tutorial sessions, as well as engaging in online discussions.

Fadzil (2002) has indicated that usually the maximum credit loading for ODL learners should not be more than 12 credits per semester, and learners are advised not to register for more than three courses per semester. At OUM, one credit hour is equivalent to 40 hours of learning in any one semester and these include self managed learning, on line learning and attending tutorials session or face to face session. The courses are divided into five categories, comprising the compulsory courses, core courses, elective courses, practicum and action research.

Another crucial component that OUM emphasises is reviewing the programme which is done by the External Examiner and Internal Committee. A periodic review will be conducted to ensure the currency of the course content, the effectiveness of delivery and recommend changes where necessary but in line with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) guidelines. External Examiners are appointed by the University to review and evaluate the programme. The report will be tabled to the Academic Management Committee and the Senate and appropriate actions will be taken by the faculty based on the recommendations in the report.

It is a practice in OUM that all the programme will be reviewed every 4 years to ensure the syllabus is kept current in terms of the technological, knowledge development and the needs of the society. Regular feedbacks are obtained from students, tutors and employers. Apart from that periodic benchmark against manpower needs is obtained whenever the programme is being reviewed.

4. Learning and Delivery Methodology

At the beginning of a learner's life in OUM, he/she is exposed to the learning skills that will enable him/her to succeed as an ODL learner. This is delivered through a course – Learning Skills for an ODL Student.

Here, they learn how to manage their time and use the facilities available at the University. OUM adopts a blended learning pedagogy which encompasses the following:

- **Self-managed learning**
Learners are provided with specially developed learning modules which allows for self-paced learning. This requires learners to study independently according to their time availability. The learning modules are creatively constructed to create an interactive and stimulative environment for increasing the learning motivation of the learners.
- **Face-to-face tutorials**
Students are encouraged to attend the face-to-face tutorials for a total of 8 hours in a semester i.e. involving 4 tutorial sessions with 2 hours per session. The tutors who conduct the tutorials are specially recruited by the University.
- **Online learning**
Students are given access 24x7 to online learning via the OUM Learning Management System (myVLE). This system enables access to the huge collection in the digital library as well as collaborative learning with peers and discussions with tutors shown in Figure 2.
- **Digital Library**
Learners of OUM are provided online accessibility to large collections of books, journals, articles. OUM students comprise largely of working adults who bring their relevant life experiences into the classroom. This contributes in the enrichment of learning. Added to this is the database of knowledge available in the digital library which will encourage scholarly pursuits and enhances creativity.

The OUM Learning Management System sets up a virtual learning environment where students are encouraged to discuss academic and related matters with their peers online. The discussion threads are accessible for students' reference. They can also easily access their tutors for academic advice and counselling. Tutors set up virtual office hours to facilitate this (at least 3 sessions of half hour each per week). There are also the student and tutor connexions (online publications) where students and tutors can contribute.

To encourage innovations in teaching and learning, recently OUM has enhance in it learning support by introducing online resources such as e-Gate, MRC (Maths Resource Centre), OER (Open Educational Resources and i-Radio (Internet radio). I-radio allows learners to listen to live discussion among panel of experts. They can also download archived programmes.

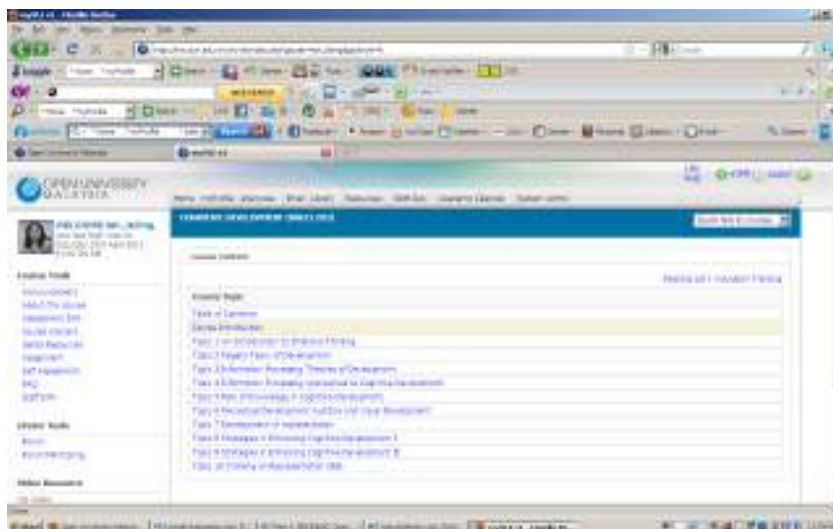


Figure 2 my VLE Interface

5. Courseware Development

The Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CiDT) is established to develop the learning modules and materials including the e-content. CiDT works closely with the faculties in OUM and content writers (subject matter experts) to produce learning materials that fit learner's requirements and are consistent with the blended pedagogy approach. It employs the instructional designers, multimedia programmers and graphics designers to produce learner-centred learning materials which are both interactive and engaging. They are produced using proven instructional design strategies and the latest information and communications technology.

It plays a pivotal role in helping the University realise its vision to be a leader and innovator in flexible learning. CiDT uses different types of media to transmit knowledge, such as audio and video-streaming. It develops print and HTML modules, learning objects, CD-ROM courseware, i-Tutorials, i-Lectures and audio books.

To ensure that the instructional design is suitable for BECHE, a team of SMEs identify and analyse the need of the content for a course and write the course materials. The selected SMEs are trained in writing skills for ODL. The writing, moderating and editing stage will follow after that. After this stage, the instructional designers together with development team members will design and develop the layout of the print-based materials as well as electronic materials. The materials are later delivered via the learning modules, CD-ROMS and uploaded in myVLE platform.

6. Assessment

Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA) is a unit that focuses on the important activities of teaching, learning and assessment. It is formed to ensure all tutors, both face-to-face tutors and online tutors, are well-trained. It is also committed in ensuring quality assessments through its stringent moderation procedures. Assessment includes assignment, mid semester and final examination as well as practical. The selection of assessment to be offered depends on the structure of the courses. Most assignments are submitted online which enables the detection of plagiarism. The online assignments are graded by e-graders. Final examinations are conducted face to face like the conventional universities.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, students graduating with a degree in this discipline are responsible for the teaching and care of young children. More and more childhood services providers are hiring people with the appropriate educational background as this is recognized as important. Graduates of a Bachelors Degree in Early Childhood Education are specialists in working with young children and developing suitable programmes for them during their formative years. This course prepares the early childhood educator with the knowledge, specialised skills and personal qualities necessary to be effective in assuming professional roles in the care and education of young children.

BECHE programmes have been offered by numerous local and foreign higher learning institutions. However, Open University Malaysia distinguishes itself by offering a unique package that ensures the students gain a competitive advantage. This is in line with our mission and Malaysia Vision 2020 to provide our students with an education of high quality which will pave the way to a successful career. The curriculum of BECHE will also enable our students to promote positive relationships among all children and adults to encourage each child's sense of individual worth and belonging as part of a community and foster each child's ability to contribute as a responsible community member.

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